

Never Forget!

Jonathan Dorfman

In early June 1941, there were 220,00 Jews living under Soviet rule in Lithuania. On June 22, 1941 the Nazis invaded and occupied Lithuania. Six months later, the Einsatzgruppen (murder squads), abetted by Lithuanian antisemitic nationalists who performed most of the killing, had murdered 180,000 Jews from ~200 rural towns. Over the three-year period of German occupation, more than 95% of Lithuania's Jewish population was murdered, a more complete destruction than befell any other country in the Holocaust.

Lithuania has been inconsistent, but mostly in denial, about their complicity in these murders. The history lessons the children receive systematically ignore the 400-year presence and horrific elimination of a vibrant Jewish community that lived harmoniously in their midst. Very few towns have openly and honestly accepted the historical reality. Memorials at the major killing sites are woefully inadequate and very few museums honor their Jewish heritage.

I can trace the presence of the Dorfman family in Birzai from around 1720 until the August 8, 1941 massacre of the 2400 Jews living in Birzai. A group of South African-born Birzai descendants, supported by the enlightened efforts of a Birzai history teacher, his son and the city municipality, raised \$250,000 with two main goals in mind – create a substantial Memorial at the killing site, including names of those murdered; and create an exhibition that chronicles the history of Birzai's Jews.

Four years after the inaugural planning meeting in Cape Town, the dedication ceremony of the Memorial was held on June 16, 2019. In attendance was the Israeli Ambassador to Lithuania, prominent Lithuanian government and public dignitaries, a group of 50 Birzai descendants, and about 400 Birzai residents. The extensive Holocaust Exhibit, planned and executed as a collaboration of the descendant group and the professional museum staff, was opened on January 27, 2026, International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

My presentation will cover the origins, design, planning and realization of the Memorial and, likewise, the Holocaust Exhibit. The 500-strong marchers, taking the same 3 Km route as those walking to their death on August 8, 1941, along with the Memorial and the Memorial dedication ceremony are covered by a very moving video.

Memorial to the 2400 Birzai Jews slaughtered at this site



Holocaust Exhibit, Birzai Regional Museum

